

VISION 21 IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes

January 5, 2006

Accepted January 19, 2006

Members Present: Donna Brescia, Vinnie DeNovellis, Victoria Hasse, Meg O'Brien, Jennifer Page, Ann Rittenburg Paul Santos, Paul Solomon, Jay Szklut

Also in attendance: Jim Fitzgerald (invited guest/presenter, member of the Public Information and Communications Planning Group)

Members absent: Austin Bliss, Sara Oaklander

1. Administrivia

- Jennifer called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. she also served as recorder for the meeting.
- Introductions were made to Jim Fitzgerald.
- Minutes of December 15, 2005, were corrected and subsequently approved as revised; the vote was unanimous with one abstention.

2. Discussion: Final Report submitted to the Board of Selectmen by the **Public Information and Communications Planning Group (PIC-PG)** in January 2003.

The goals of the discussion were to review the recommendations cited in the report, to determine how successfully these had been implemented, and to determine if follow-up work by the Vision Implementation Committee is called for.

2.1 Introduction: Meg O'Brien, as chair of the Planning Group, gave an overview of the group's composition, its mandate, and how the work was conducted.

2.1.1 Composition: The PIC Planning Group included representation from several Belmont groups that have a "stake" in government-resident communications; groups included the Vision Committee, ITAC, Cable Access Committee, Belmont Electric Light Department, and resident Jim Fitzgerald. Not all invited groups sent a representative (e.g. Library, Cable Advisory Committee, League of Women Voters.)

2.1.2 The mandate called for PIC-PG to develop new and to improve existing methods of reciprocal information sharing and communication between the public (residents and business owners) and town government. Meg cited areas of the Vision Statement that were relevant.

2.1.3 A variety of strategies were employed including conducting interviews with key individuals in the town and the public, reviewing data from town department heads (through studying interview notes from ITAC), tracking usage of the Town's web site, holding a public forum, and others.

2.2 Results: Jim Fitzgerald walked the Vision Committee through PIC's presentation to the Selectmen, updating the Committee on the status of each recommendation as follows:

2.2.1 Recommendation: "Continue to provide communication through many channels – phone, paper, BTWS (web site), cable T.V."

Updates/Comment:

- Since the Citizen-Herald reaches perhaps 25% of the households, it should be regarded as only one method of communication. The Citizen Forum's newsletter is also informative but has an even smaller circulation.
- Jim Fitzgerald noted that with Town-owned communications systems, there are always costs – in investment, maintenance, and training -- thereby challenging or limiting some plans for change in these financially stricken times.
- Other communications vehicles (phone, BTWS, cable) are treated separately, below, as individual recommendations.

2.2.2 Recommendation: “Improve phone service levels.”

Updates/Comments:

- A new phone system is gradually being phased in. It will connect town offices to one another and make transferring calls possible.
- Customer communications requirements were considered in selection of the new phone system.
- General feedback: phones work better now.
- Difficulty: the previous phone system owner (CTC) is refusing to relinquish ownership of the lines, making it impossible for users to make 411 calls. The Town and new provider (Verizon) are working to address this problem.
- Some phone training of employees has been undertaken, though both cost and time availability have been limiting factors.
- On-line Town Directory is limited to listing department heads.

2.2.3 Recommendation: “Continue to improve and invest in the Web site (BTWS)”

Updates/Comments:

- Belmont's web site, “Virtual Town Hall” is a website design software used by some neighboring communities. It is relatively inexpensive, gives relatively good service but is very rigid. Recent improvements are well received by the public.
- Change: Some parts of the web site have been reorganized, making them easier to navigate.
- The Town's web site has many limitations, e.g. (a) the fact that it is organized by town department which may not be useful for users who don't know how our town government is organized; (b) there is no “f.a.q.” section (frequently asked questions), search capability on the site has improved but is limited. (c) The document repository appears to be limited.
- Change: The “hits” to the town web site continue to increase. Clearly, residents are turning to it more and more.
- Change: The number of phone calls to town offices is decreasing, and e-mails to town offices are increasing. This suggests that the public has easier access to town government (good) but more employee time is spent responding to e-mails (perhaps not so good); however, offices are perceived as being responsive to e-mail.
- Some confusion voiced about what happens to “comments” made to the town (via the web) – Are comments forwarded to the office in question? Or does the resident need to follow up him/herself? (Paul Solomon volunteered to follow up.)
- Change: some offices are starting to use the web in an intentionally interactive way; e.g., the Recreation Department has converted to on-line applications, making it easier to do business with the Town.
- Residents who sign up can receive “automatic” announcements from Town departments via e-mail.

- Although the town has “reverse 911” for emergency phone notification, there is no “automatic/reverse e-mail” notification to residents about town emergencies.

2.2.4 Recommendation: “Plan for increasing investment in the BTWS.”

Updates/Comments:

- Usage metrics are being tracked, but there are such limited funds that increased investment in the web site is highly unlikely.

2.2.5 Recommendation: “Ensure that all Town Departments and employees are properly engaged in providing and maintaining BTWS.”

Updates/Comments:

- Training is on-going but very limited due to cost and employee time.
- At least one person in each department has been partially trained on updating their departmental web site, so there is hope that the web sites may be current.

2.2.6 Recommendation: Educate residents about how to find and provide information on the Web Site.

Update/Comment:

- None of the suggestions offered with this recommendation have been addressed.

2.2.7 Recommendation: Encourage and enhance the use of cable T.V

Update/comment:

- An agreement has been reached with the Belmont Community Media Center. The new media center is temporarily funded by Comcast which will no longer have “ownership”.
- A new executive director has been hired, with a Cable Access Committee to work with the director.
- Negotiations are under way with Verizon, which may offer cable TV. in Belmont and therefore may also help support the Media Center.
- Equipment is being updated.
- Additional Town meetings are now being broadcast: the Warrant committee also is now videotaped.
- The Center is seeking more space.
- Challenges abound: the Center needs new producers and other volunteers; training and retaining volunteers is critical.
- An additional challenge: to wire additional rooms in municipal buildings so that more locations can be used for videotaping meetings and presentations.
- Some new programs are now being produced at the studio; one example given was “Belmont Focus” – a Belmont public affairs show hosted by Julie Altschuler

2.3 General observations

- Comment was made that there has been a cultural transformation regarding communications; the human network (personal interactions) was the center of communication in the past. We may want to consider ways to encourage a revitalization of that mode – for example, building stronger, friendlier neighborhoods.
- If there are problems in communication between and among departments, we may want to urge the Town government consider restructuring itself. Does the current “department” structure work well?

2.4 Ideas for next steps

We brainstormed ideas for further action the VIC may wish to take:

- We may want to undertake organizing a training program for Belmont residents on how to use the Town's web site. The teens/elders program on using the Internet is successful in the library. Might we find a way to focus that energy on teaching about the town's web site? Or perhaps hold such training in the Senior Center?
- We may want to help find a way to put some "q & a" section on the town web – perhaps building on the booklet the VIC created for newcomers.
- "Push" information to residents. Joyce Munro had started a quarterly newsletter (at the urging of Jim Fitzgerald.) Then Joyce left Belmont. Can we resurrect the newsletter? (Paul Solomon volunteered to look into this.)
- Might we organize a town committee of volunteers to create a newsletter for residents as a community service? It might be a subset of the Vision Committee/ Neighbors Network.
- VIC members might become BETA testers for the website.
- We should all take advantage of the "comments" part of the town's main web page, give feedback immediately to town departments whose web pages are confusing or otherwise in need of improvement.
- We might recommend to the Selectmen that they form an advisory group on issues of communication.

3. Review of revised proposal of topics for upcoming meetings

Jennifer distributed a copy of the schedule showing the changes agreed upon at the last meeting. On January 19 we will consider the "welcoming community" initiative, spending part of the time with representatives of Belmont Neighbors Network and part of the time examining the welcoming booklet produced by the VIC in 2002.

4. Martin Luther King Day breakfast:

Jennifer asked for volunteers who could help distribute flyers to houses of worship and businesses in town (Meg volunteered) and for volunteers who could help on the day itself either with set-up or clean-up. (Meg, Donna, and Jennifer volunteered.)

5. Sustainable Belmont: This task force of VIC will need some help organizing and facilitating public input forums as they begin to develop a Climate Action Plan for Belmont. Since one of VIC's standards is to promote public involvement in Town affairs, Jennifer urged us all to be prepared to help on this effort. No specifics yet, but volunteers will be solicited soon!

6. Next Meeting: Thursday, January 19th, 2006 from 7-9 p.m.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Page
Secretary Pro Tempore